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AUTHOR	Westwood, Andy
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ABSTRACT

Some new work is good work. Quality is ultimately defined by the individual. However, these perceptions are inevitably colored by the circumstances in which people find themselves, by the time, place, and wide range of motivations for having to do a particular job in the first place. One person's quality may be another's purgatory and vice versa. Four important changes in Great Britain's labor market are a major decline in the number of people in manual employment; a rise in skilled employment of people performing managerial, professional, and technical jobs; a rise in mixed but essentially low formal skilled employment performed by "personal and protective" workers; and the continued increase of women in the labor force. The point may be not that newer work is bad or worse because it has replaced older, more traditional industrial and manual jobs but that women do these emerging jobs. Retail has been one of the most maligned types of work, but popular perceptions have been misplaced. ASDA/Walmart has been voted the best place to work in Britain. Some reasons are its approach to its employees or colleagues and the vast range of benefits on offer to them. Retailers like ASDA have been at the forefront of business in restoring job opportunities to parts of Britain that need them the most. Britain needs more good jobs because Britains need to perform better as an entire labor market. (Contains 47 references.) (YLB)

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ED 478 132

Is new work good work?

Andy Westwood

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Introduction

Everyone who has ever worked has an opinion about the worst jobs available in today's labour market. Some will have formed these views through bitter experience while others just wince at the thought of ever having to do certain types of work.

Ending up in these 'bad jobs' is a constant danger outlined by politicians,[1] parents, and teachers and now even by television – the UK's worst jobs have their own TV programmes.[2] But what are these bad jobs? What qualifies a job to be considered amongst the UK's worst? Conversely, what constitutes quality in work? And what are the factors that differentiate good from bad?

In today's turbulent labour market, waves of job losses have hit the numbers of 'traditional' jobs in the UK. Manufacturing has witnessed a steep decline since the 1970s, as have other traditional sectors such as mining and agriculture. Within sectors there has also been a drop in the number of blue and white-collar jobs and an apparent devaluation in the status, pay and/or security of other careers, whether for teachers, doctors or bank managers. Working time has been turned on its head – only a minority of UK workers now work a regular nine to five shift – and the 24/7 economy has taken hold. The workplace is less masculine – there are more women in today's workplace and proportionately fewer men. The labour market has witnessed massive and far-reaching change – so much so that it has passed into modern day folklore that the UK now sees more turnover from Indian restaurants than from coal, steel and shipbuilding combined.[3]

Assumptions and expectations about work have changed too. Labelling jobs as 'old' or 'new' or 'good' and 'bad' may ultimately be a rather fatuous exercise. In reality, all labour markets will always contain a mixture of all four elements and many more besides. After all, it may be stating the obvious that new jobs will include hi-tech, high-earning careers as well as low-paid manual jobs; the service sector will include jobs at Harvey Nicks as well as at Homebase, and opportunities in Michelin-starred restaurants as well as at McDonald's. More confusing perhaps is the explosion in new

public sector jobs fuelled by the Labour government's pledge to improve public services – how 'good' are these jobs?

But there is a serious and a more straightforward point to be explored here: why is it that we increasingly seem to mourn the passing of the older 'better' jobs and to view new forms of employment with such disdain? There are widespread public perceptions and conversations about the quality of work that need to be rethought.

Is new work good work?

1 Generation X and the Full Monty – what is new work?

McJob – a low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one.

The term 'McJob' was first coined by the American author Douglas Coupland in the cult novel *Generation X*. It has stuck fast in popular terminology, even assuming collective status for all such service sector occupations, not just those beneath the golden arches.

However, the 'McJob' is one of the fastest growing occupations in the UK and is now the biggest single employer of people under 21. It is a job at the very heart of the 21st century labour market, even though it was essentially designed over half a century ago. Richard and Maurice McDonald were the founders of McDonald's, but Ray Kroc first revolutionised the fast food system in 1948. They divided the production of their restaurant food into discrete (skill-less) tasks applying the time and motion paradigm that previously had ruled factory assembly lines. Machines were, and still are, designed so that workers can reach high speeds in minutes.

In the UK, the supermarket shelf stacker is a job with similar perceptions. Typically associated with the big four employers – ASDA, Safeway, Sainsbury's and Tesco (and with large regionally based chains such as Morrisons) – it is a job in a workplace that is increasingly dominant in our towns and cities.

The supermarket is arguably the most successful business establishment of the last 25 years. Its importance as a shopping destination is matched by its importance in our labour market – employing literally millions of people in the UK each year. It has been estimated that we will each spend a year of our lives in supermarkets[•] in the process of parting with enormous and increasing levels of spending. Yet popular culture seems to dictate that, along with the McJob, it is a career destination at the very end of the food chain. We will shop in them in droves but most of us wouldn't want to work in them. It's a bizarre situation that we seem to

hate to work in the places we are spending more and more money[5] and time. There is no doubt that the British have a very curious attitude to the sector. We naturally rail against the intensity of the American service culture – where consumerism and the jobs associated with it seem much more acceptable.[6]

Even compared to other parts of Europe, this attitude towards retail jobs seems perplexing. In France, for example, the supermarket occupies a similar position in the labour market to that in the UK – especially in terms of numbers of leading brands, stores and jobs – and yet they are nowhere near as vilified. This could be the case for two reasons; first. France remains an economy with a significant rural and agriculture influence – the supermarkets benefit from the proximity of production and consumerism; and second, in large parts of France the supermarket has not replaced or displaced any other forms of work, new or old.

This may be a major reason behind some of the more well-known condemnations of UK retailing jobs. The UK's biggest grossing feature film of all time – *The Full Monty* – deals with the loss of status, dignity and livelihood of a group of ex-steelworkers in Sheffield. Their old traditional jobs have disappeared and the only replacements available appear to be at ASDA.[7] This is where the wives and girlfriends of the steelworkers have found work.

Interior, ASDA, day

Gaz follows Dave into the suit section.

Gaz: Well come on then Mr Security, do your job.

Gaz rips a suit off the nearest hanger and heads for the door at speed. Dave goes after him.

Dave: Gaz ... please don't do it

Gaz: You've got a job, do it

Dave: Gazza ...

Exterior, ASDA, day

Gaz makes it through the doors with a suit, setting off all the alarms in the process. He laughs manically, shouting and waving the suit in the air, with Dave close behind.[8]

Working at ASDA seems not only to have less value than the traditional steelworking jobs formerly undertaken by these men, but also less value than stealing and stripping.

Even television news teams get in on the act. When stories about the large-scale loss of older, traditional jobs (usually in manufacturing) are published, they are usually twinned with an announcement about similarly large-scale job creation (usually in the service sector). Supermarkets and large retailers such as ASDA and Tesco have been responsible for some such announcements.[9] But there seems to be a widespread doubt about the quality of these jobs – about their status (part time, not full time), their pay and conditions, whether unions are recognised, their security, access to training and so on.

Bizarrely, this popular perception is even reinforced by some of the government's own advertising. In television and cinema adverts promoting the government's adult learning service 'Learndirect', people in dull, dead-end jobs are implored to take up a course and improve their careers. Unsurprisingly, one advert shows someone stacking supermarket shelves.[10]

There is another dimension to these criticisms; the suggestion that these jobs are not as 'good' as the ones that they are replacing. They are not done by the same people, there is no career structure, they are unskilled, they involve mindless repetition of tasks and they contribute little to the UK's economy.

What has actually changed in the UK labour market?

"Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. Many traditional industries are either evolving or dying while new ones arise phoenix like from their ashes. The rest of the world is not standing still – without constant review and renewal, UK businesses will lose their

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> competitive edge and find it increasingly hard to regain lost ground. As industry changes, so too does the nature of employment, the organisation of the workplace, and the skills that individuals need to participate successfully in the new world that is evolving. At the centre of this transformation lies the progression from the industrial society, based at its heart upon the physical capital of land, plant and machinery, to an information and knowledge based society built upon intellectual capital, the knowledge, imagination and creativity of our people."[11]

There have been four important changes in the labour market in the last thirty or so years. First, and most obviously, there has been a major decline in the number of people in manual employment – the most notable aspect of manufacturing's decline in the UK. The share of skilled manual workers in total employment has fallen from 18 to 12 per cent (there are currently 3.2 million such workers). Despite this shift, our labour market is still too heavily influenced by the 'psyche' of manufacturing – apprenticeships, craft skills, traditional male jobs. Second, there has been a rise in skilled employment of people performing managerial, professional and technical jobs. The share of workers in these occupations has risen from a quarter to a third.

Third, and where retail and hospitality jobs are classified, there has been a rise in mixed but essentially low formal skilled employment performed by a group classified as 'personal and protective' workers. These jobs are most evident in the expansion of new shops, restaurants and also in the growth of personal service occupations such as childcare. Their share of total employment has risen from around 6 per cent to around 11 per cent.[12] Fourth, the last thirty years have seen the continued increase of women in the UK labour market. Participation rates have risen dramatically, especially in those newer sectors and jobs that have been expanding most dramatically in recent years.

There are two other parallel developments that have occurred behind these headline shifts. A kind of 'winner-takes-all' effect is seen within all occupations, with a widening pay gap between different groups of

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workers and also within different groups of workers. The increased use of technology in many workplaces, whichever sector they are in, has also had a huge, if slightly inconclusive, effect.

These changes in the labour market have had the greatest impact on traditional workers in the UK. The participation of older men in the labour market has dropped sharply, as have jobs for semi and unskilled workers. These broad sets of changes have had most impact in parts of the UK where such work has been most dominant – the industrial North, Midlands, Scotland and parts of the South and South East.

However, the UK's labour market remains healthy. Claimant count has been below the million mark for over a year and there are more jobs available than ever before. Our job creation record is unparalleled – at least in Europe – and much of it is down to the huge expansion of the UK's service sector. This phenomenon has maintained employment levels despite the seemingly nightly reports of huge job losses in de-industrialising areas of the UK. At the same time, there are announcements of significant new sources of job creation.

Considering these changes it is perhaps notionally easier to see a difference between 'new' and 'old' work. It is also clear to see why particular groups of men might make this distinction as those working in heavy industry, manual work and those in particular parts of the country have seen their job opportunities fall away. This is the attitude in which *The Full Monty* is set. Changes in work have been bad for the ex-steelworking men in Sheffield, but what about the women? At the beginning of the film, the black and white publicity shots of an earlier, more prosperous Sheffield show no shots of the city's working women. There would certainly have been far fewer. In this sense the film's narrative touches only momentarily on the impact of new work on women's lives. They have not only become wage earners but sometimes the sole breadwinners in their households; they have disposable income to spend going out; they are stronger in society relative to their unemployed

husbands and male peers. Consider Simon Beaufoy's description of the film's setting in his introduction to the printed screenplay.

> "Where were all the women? It appeared that, unlike the men, the women had jobs. Not perhaps good jobs: cashier, packing, shelf-stacking jobs in the monstrous Meadowhall Shopping Centre that replaced the steel rolling mills. But jobs nevertheless. Which meant money. Which meant Friday nights down the pub with the ... well, it used to be lads. But the lads were out walking their invisible dogs, wondering why people didn't want steel any more, just shopping centres."

Again the mention that such work might not be 'good' – but is there more to this point? Is it that newer work is bad or worse because it has replaced older, more traditional jobs but also perhaps because these jobs are done by women?

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2 Arkwright and ASDA ... what is it really like on Britain's 'shop floor'?

Richard Arkwright was perhaps the most significant contributor to Britain's industrial revolution and the founder of industrial work as we have known it since that time. Born in Preston in 1732, he was a gruff, bad-tempered businessman and entrepreneur who, after spells as a wigmaker, barber and publican, turned to manufacturing. During this phase of his working life he spied the commercial potential of the new technology in the making of cotton. He stole and adapted the idea of using powered rollers to spin cotton[13] in the 1760s and 70s and became the first man to set up the mass producing mills that fuelled and characterised the Industrial Revolution in the north of Britain.

However, by the 1780s he had lost the leadership and commercial head start that he had acquired in the cotton industry. He had sited his factories in relatively obscure and isolated parts of the country such as Cromford (near Nottingham), Bakewell and Belper, and the relentless industrialisation of other parts of the North West – mainly in and around Manchester – had quickly used up and overtaken his own technological advances. But Arkwright can still claim to have had as much responsibility for creating the industrial job as any of his ancestors, contemporaries or successors. He can also claim to have been a highly responsible employer – a man who seemed to care deeply about his workers. He paid good wages and maintained relatively good conditions in his factories – but his business was already losing out to the less scrupulous factory and mill owners in the dominant cities of the new industrial Britain:

> "High wages were not enough: Arkwright had to offer employment for the whole family, housing, a public house, a weekly market and garden allotments in order to persuade people to move from Derby, Nottingham or Manchester; staff turnover remained high. In sharp contrast, in the cities there was no problem of recruitment; Manchester at the end of the century had plenty of applicants, who even found it hard to get work."[14]

Defeated by the problems of an ever tightening labour market and geographical isolation, the cradle of the industrial revolution now shifted

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inexorably and perhaps finally to Manchester.[15] Here, the concentration of factories, cheaper labour and industrial capital combined to create some of the worst working conditions in modern Britain. Elizabeth Gaskell was one of the first contemporary writers to describe the lives of Manchester's new working classes in 'Mary Barton':

> "The furnace roared with mighty flame. The men like demons, in their fire- and-soot clothing, stood swart around, waiting for the moment when the tons of solid iron should have melted down into fiery liquid, fit to be poured, with still, heavy sound, into the delicate moulding of fine black sand, prepared to receive it. The heat was intense, and the red glare grew every instant more fierce. The black figures, holding strange shaped bucket-shovels, came athwart the deep red furnace light and clear and brilliant flowed forth the iron into the appropriate mould."[16]

Manchester occupies a unique place in the history of work. It was the first city in the UK's industrial empire – a place closely identified with technological revolution, new business ideas, massive social change and new notions of working life. In the 19th century it was described as the 'shock city' of the industrial revolution – the rapid expansion of its size and the social consequences for its citizens bringing both praise and condemnation from far and wide. Disraeli, Gaskell, Marx and Engels all came to ruminate on the worldwide consequences of the city's rapid industrialisation. For most the work available in the city was indisputably bad – it was 'new' work and it was the first step to either early graves, bloody revolution and/or the apocalypse.

Working life in Arkwright's time was both new and bad – and there has been a constant stream of social commentaries ever since that have continued to pour scorn on the industrial job. Orwell famously travelled through the terrible working conditions of 1930s Britain on his way to Wigan Pier; Lowry created the definitive images of factory-centred working lives; *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* could have been a prequel to *The Full Monty* – but without the laughs. What might Engels, Lowry, Orwell or Sillitoe have made of redundant steelworkers stripping in order to regain their working dignity?

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Again, though, the balanced assessment would be that the 'new work' in 18th and 19th century Britain was both good and bad. Arkwright might have invented the industrial job but equally unwittingly he may have also helped to inspire today's movements for corporate social responsibility. By all accounts he was a pretty good employer. People might have lived, worked and died in Manchester's workhouses and slums, but in Arkwright's Bakewell or Cromford they lived in the countryside with their employer laying on pubs, markets, and allotments as well as decent wages. The overriding point throughout history is one of subjectivity – quality was, and is, in the eye of the beholder.

But wages, perks and working conditions aside, the social commentators of 19th century Britain still bemoaned the soulless, depersonalised repetition of work:

> "It was a town of red brick, or of a brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it ... It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom everyday was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next."[1]

Nearly two centuries after Dickens' *Hard Times*, the familiar criticisms are still levelled at the demands of 'bad' work. In *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser describes the mind-numbing daily routine of the modern fast food job:

> "They turn on the ovens and grills. They go downstairs into the basement and get food and supplies for the morning shift. They get the paper cups, wrappers, cardboard containers and packets of condiments. They step into the big freezer and get the frozen bacon, the frozen pancakes and the frozen cinnamon rolls. They get the frozen hash browns, the frozen biscuits, the frozen mcmuffins. They get the cartons of scrambled egg mix and orange juice mix. They bring the food upstairs and start preparing it.

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> before any customers appear, thawing some things in the microwave and cooking other things on the grill."

Marx jobs or Mcjobs – the repetition and the condemnations, although separated by two hundred years of commentary, seem bizarrely familiar.

Open All Hours – Mary Barton meets Sam Walton

Amidst the now converted industrial buildings of 21st century Manchester – the original home of the old manufacturing job – you can easily see the places of work that have replaced these old jobs. The centre of the city is dominated by shopping centres, universities, restaurants, banks and museums. Just to the east of the city centre, next to the brand new stadium that recently hosted the Commonwealth Games, stands the UK's newest supermarket – ASDA Wal-Mart. Here is one of the latest and shiniest examples of a 21st century place of work. It might look slightly incongruous among Manchester's residue of industrial architecture, and the juxtaposition between new and old work is striking in a part of Manchester so recently characterised by decay, unemployment and crime.

This is the place where the descendants of Mary Barton[19] and other 19th century workers now earn their living. In a more recent twist of fate there are many employees – or colleagues as ASDA prefer – who have only just returned to work after periods of unemployment or redundancy from some of Manchester's more traditional manufacturing jobs. Like the mills and the factories of 18th century Manchester, most of the store's employees live within a few minutes of the store and walk or cycle to work.

This is the latest, most up-to-date version of the new work so vilified in *The Full Monty* – only with added American ownership. It's also one of the flagship stores of a company recently voted the best place to work in the UK by *The Times* and the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI).

ASDA is one of the giants of the UK's service sector. With annual sales of over £9.7 billion and over 126,000 employees, it has expanded dramatically to over 250 stores and 11 depots across the whole of the UK.

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Founded in 1965 by Peter and Fred Asquith, two Yorkshire farmers, by the 1980s it was virtually bankrupt. Its route to profitability under Archie Norman and then Allan Leighton was to replicate a US-style service culture. In 1999 this process was completed when Wal-Mart agreed a £6.7 billion takeover deal.

Wal-Mart may have begun to appear alongside ASDA on the signage of the newer stores but otherwise there seems to be little change in the ASDA approach. Wal-Mart may never be voted the best place to work in the US and yet its subsidiary has achieved that accolade in the UK. This is not something that anyone would have predicted at the time of the takeover in 1999.

> "ASDA have a very good reason to celebrate this week – on Sunday they achieved the coveted position of the number one best company to work for in the UK! But every company featured in the *Sunday Times Top 100* list has reason to be proud ... Great Place to Work UK Ltd started their search for the UK's best employers back in the summer of last year, and Sunday 24 March saw the culmination of their efforts, with the publication of the *Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For*, sponsored this year by DTI and Learndirect."[19]

The *Great Place to Work Top 100* was compiled following surveys and interviews with a cross-section of employees. Points were awarded for working atmosphere, access to training, pay and benefit policies, and staff recognition schemes. ASDA came out top with 153 out of a possible 175 points.

All in all an amazing combination of old and new firms from a variety of sectors – construction, accountancy, hospitality, IT, entertainment, pharmaceuticals, banking, law. Just how did a Leeds-based supermarket group owned by Wal-Mart make it to the top?

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TABLE 1 The top 20 places to work in the UK 2002

1	ASDA	**11**	SAP
2	Microsoft	**12**	Capital One
3	Richer Sounds	**13**	MBNA
4	Bain & Company	**14**	Intel
5	AIT	**15**	Sun Microsystems
6	Timpson	**16**	W L Gore
7	Cisco Systems	**17**	Computer Associates
8	Goldman Sachs	**18**	Benfield Group
9	Bacardi Martini	**19**	Wragge and Co
10	JLT Risk Solutions	**20**	Bettys and Taylors

Selected others: **21:** Morgan Stanley, **30:** Volkswagen, **34:** Pret a Manger, **41:** Arup, **46:** AstraZeneca, **58:** British American Tobacco, **74:** Accenture, **85:** Pizza Express, **92:** Eversheds.

So what does the 21st century Arkwright offer?

ASDA, by its own admission, is never going to be the greatest payer in the world. And yet it is far better than most people might expect. Hourly pay for colleagues when they start is £4.42 for their first 12 weeks and £4.85 per hour thereafter – it varies across some of the different jobs available in each of its stores. All employees get a pay and benefits summary with their salary – with all value on it (pension, savings, pay, bonuses, etc, all included) and the savings from the use of their 10% store discount card.

There are company pension schemes and ASDA share plans – and over 70% of employees take part. There are special mortgage deals, unsecured personal loans and even an ASDA ISA. However, one of the most successful financial benefits is the Law Club. For 10p per week the club is open to all employees wanting to access legal advice and support on any issue. The service can include employment rights as well as writing wills and dealing with any personal or family legal problems.

And there's more: childcare vouchers, debt advice and medical cover, there's leave for anything you like – extended holidays, religious festivals, adoption, kids starting school; discounts on cars, at theme parks, the cinema and on holidays. They have all come as part of a revolution in workplace benefits that ASDA can genuinely claim to have led the way with in the early 1990s. From a starting point of offering very little to anyone outside the top teams, they have universalised their benefits and incentives packages, driving them down to every single employee.

Managers and supervisors at ASDA can expect to earn very competitive salaries. And there are extremely well-worn routes for all colleagues to get to these kinds of levels of pay and responsibility. ASDA runs a *'So You Want To Be ...'* approach to career development. From their first days in store all new colleagues will see the posters and information advertising these development opportunities. Each position at ASDA has a carefully mapped out process of how to reach it and extraordinary numbers apply for and eventually achieve these jobs.

But don't expect a raft of any new benefits and perks when you get to these levels. ASDA has intentionally stripped away the status symbols and hierarchy that often dominate UK organisations. No business cards, reserved parking places or different dress codes. And no new incentives or benefits that have not already been made available to colleagues at the start of their careers.

In fact, go behind the scenes at any ASDA and a whole new world will open up to you. Everyone is on first-name terms and buys tea with the same charge cards; managers are indistinguishable from their colleagues as there are no separate dress codes, no big offices and no top management attitudes; 78% of staff in the *Great Place to Work* survey felt there was no backstabbing or bad atmospheres in the workplace. At some sites you will quickly realise that you are in one of the eight 'Stores of Learning' – with huge numbers of colleagues who are in the process of 'Wanting to Be', with learning facilities to match.

Location, location, location

There is another factor that qualifies ASDA and several other leading retailers as a good employer. When announcements of job losses are made in the media and job creation is tagged on at the end of the piece – it would be fair for viewers and listeners to assume that the new jobs are unlikely to be in the same places where jobs have been lost. In some newer industries such as IT and tourism this is inevitably the case, leading in turn to incredibly tight and overflowing labour markets in areas like London and the Thames Valley. And while ASDA may have a relatively small presence in some of these areas, their heartlands are in the same manufacturing-dominated, de-industrialising communities where old jobs are being shed hand over fist.

A look down ASDA's list of store locations does not appear identifiable with the more affluent middle England of high employment levels – far from it. East Manchester, Walthamstow, Darlaston, Blackwood in South Wales, Ashington, Accrington, Burnley, Maryhill and Gravesend; these are all places where communities have had to suffer huge waves of instantaneous job loss. These are the places where a new store with several hundred new jobs can make considerable material differences to individuals, households and communities.

But it is undoubtedly a double-edged sword; it is the very situation that gives way to the direct and unforgiving comparison between new and old work that we see in *The Full Monty*. They are an easy and obvious target for the familiar yet increasingly unfair criticisms.

3 Good jobs, bad jobs – the dignity of work

"There's a man I meet walks up our street
He's a worker for the council has been twenty years
And he takes no lip from nobody and litter off the gutter
Puts it in a bag and never thinks to mutter
And he packs his lunch in a 'Sunblest' bag,
the children call him bogey
He never lets on but I know cause he once told me
He let me know a secret about the money in his kitty
He's going to buy a dinghy, gonna call her dignity."[20]

Dignity in working life can appear elusive. Certainly, in terms of popular culture, it is a lack of dignity that becomes the decisive factor in determining whether or not a particular job is acceptable. Dignity was the apparent difference between working in steel and retail in *The Full Monty*. However, it may be as difficult to define as quality, although it does not necessarily mean the same thing. Dignity in labour may not elevate a job above the repetition, low pay or long hours that we might associate with 'bad' work. But it does indisputably make the type of work more socially acceptable.

If popular perception about good and bad jobs is so strong then it seems useful to attempt to define the principles of the 'good' work. This would be especially useful if we are interesting in disentangling new and old from good and bad.

Of course, there are those politicians and commentators who consider all work to be good – at least in its effect on the people who work. Thomas Carlyle talked about the dignity of labour in the 19th century – to him work itself had a higher purpose. It provided moral and social discipline for the masses and esteem, identity and purpose for the new working classes. Quality of work was irrelevant to Victorian policymakers and it has been a subject of remarkably little interest to successive UK governments ever

since. Quantity of work, however, has been a different matter altogether. Overall employment levels have had enormous importance, and at times of high unemployment they are perhaps the biggest single political and economic issue that individual politicians must address. But quality of work, not really – not even for a Labour Party founded on the need to improve the conditions of the working classes.

Quality of work may be a difficult, abstract concept to grasp and may also be political dynamite – a no-win scenario for any government more interested in high levels of employment. However, it is a concept that seems to concern some politicians and civil servants both in the UK and in the European Union – indeed the recent EU summit at Lisbon[21] adopted a framework for increasing the quality of work amongst member states. But in the UK concerns about quality are expressed in a variety of ways.

One indicator will clearly be the levels of satisfaction with their work that people report. On the international league table of job satisfaction, Britain is in 17th place. Denmark comes out on top with 62% of its workers claiming to be completely or very satisfied with their jobs, while this only applies to 36% in the UK. Countries like Switzerland, Spain and the US easily outperform us. Too many people in the UK do not appear to be happy at work. In a recent survey that the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) carried out with the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), it was found that a majority of respondents are used to 'sticking with their lot' in the labour market. This cannot say much for their perception of 'quality'.

Work by Oswald and Gardner,[22] based mainly on the British Household Panel Survey has found that men are less satisfied than women, non-white workers less satisfied than white, that job satisfaction falls with age until the late 30s but then rises among older people, that longer hours of work cause dissatisfaction, and that employees in small workplaces are more satisfied than those in large. It also found that public sector workers were more satisfied than private, although the gap has narrowed sharply over the 1990s.

Different quality factors can be divided into 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' features.[23] Intrinsic factors would include the work itself, how challenging it is, and how much control individuals might have over how they perform their work. Extrinsic features would include pay and benefits, training, job security and opportunities for career advancement. Different people will obviously rank these elements in different orders according to their own preferences and circumstances – job quality will therefore always be at least partly subjective and personally defined.

However, beyond measures of job satisfaction, relatively little is known about what employees themselves define as good work. Pay, security, flexibility, training, the right to join a trade union and the likelihood of promotion might all crop up in different surveys but it would be wrong to automatically assume that these are the only elements of quality that concern the British worker.

Love and the lottery; whose quality?

What other factors do people include when deciding how 'good' their jobs are? They are certainly not going to be the same factors that a politician or an academic might list. Perhaps they are more practical – the things that make the day-to-day reality of bad jobs more acceptable, the wider value of things that occur during work or because of work rather than the job and its tasks in isolation.

In *Happy Mondays*, Richard Reeves suggests the following six measures of job quality:

- We want to choose what we do.
- We want to control it.
- We want to reap the rewards of our own ideas.
- We want money.
- We want a superb working environment.
- And we want to be able to jump ship whenever we feel like it!

Do these measures in aggregation make up the good job? How recognisable are these demands to the working population as a whole? Let's try and see.

According to a survey by The Work Foundation, one in three respondents had met most of their friends through their jobs; 49% of female respondents met most of their friends at work compared to only 19% of men. One commentator goes as far as to report that up to half of us meet our future partners through work too.[24]

Without necessarily having to go as far as finding your friends and partners at work, it is true that one of the major indicators of satisfaction at work is the type of people that you have to work with. Another survey from The Work Foundation across many organisations showed that 57% of employees rated a 'friendly working atmosphere' as one of the most important factors in any job that they might do. The CBI back this notion in their research when they find that good working relationships with colleagues and team members are the single most important determinant of job satisfaction. A Gallup poll further reinforces that 'nice colleagues' are the most important factor in any job.[25]

This strong co-worker or team ethic helps to reinforce another phenomenon – the rise of the workplace lottery syndicate. Camelot report this as an expanding element of their regular weekly ticket purchasers. People obviously want to share their winnings (and of course their potential exits from their jobs) with their friends in the workplace. Other individual winners still like to stay on with their working friends; Roger Robar won £5.8 million but bought the restaurant he worked in so that he could still cook there for three nights a week. Simon Fullerton-Ballantyne won £1.89 million and initially quit his job – but then later returned to buy the company too.

Money, money, money

Money is powerful in all its forms; whether the possible, in the case of the syndicated lottery ticket, the *potential*, in terms of promotions and pay rises somewhere along somebody's career path, or the actual pay and conditions that make up the present. The same surveys describing the importance of friends and colleagues at work also place pay firmly at or near the top. The Work Foundation found that 78% of all respondents put salary and pay as one of the top three factors in why people did their

current jobs. Among the lower paid, the IPPR found that pay was 'the first and most important thing that people like about their work.'[26] However, this does not mean that they like their pay levels. Getting paid is a fundamental reason for working, the amount of pay can be a reason for satisfaction, dissatisfaction – and for those who are content with their pay – ambivalence. For this reason pay sometimes fails to feature in people's descriptions of the quality of their job; getting paid can almost be taken for granted.

In the end though, you just can't get away from it. Whether people expect to enjoy their work or not, they do expect to be paid. Of course, sometimes people are prepared to sacrifice a huge number of other quality factors if their level of pay can compensate. Lawyers, accountants and management consultants are just a few of the occupations where people routinely expect to sacrifice hours, conditions and rights for more money. And there was a time when workers in public services were routinely prepared to make the same material sacrifices just for the dignity of their jobs.

Whether working in the public or private sector, employees increasingly wish to be paid what they think they are worth – particularly if there is a gap between pay and living costs. A secondary teacher in the Bristol area recently asked their headteacher for a pay rise:

Teacher: 'I just want to be paid what I'm worth.'
Head: 'You wouldn't survive.'[27]

Access to training and career development would seem an obvious factor in determining quality for both people in jobs and for those whose job it is to observe them. We are, after all, supposed to be living and working in the knowledge age. As an indicator of quality this might quickly divide the kind of jobs that do routinely offer such opportunities from those that will not. In the UK's workforce, access to training is unequal, with managers and professionals or those with a degree up to five times more likely to receive work-based training than people with no qualification and those

in an unskilled job. Worse still, these people are highly unlikely to have received any training at all over their past five years in work.[28]

According to the government's own skills survey, approximately a third of the workforce believe that their jobs require no skills or qualifications.[29] Furthermore, they may also be the jobs that such individuals stay in for short periods of time with low pay, little training, insecurity and limited prospects. However, many people might consider the need for training a bad thing, particularly if they are unable to read or write and thus take any effective part in such learning or development. One in five adults within the workforce are functionally illiterate and as high as one in four are functionally innummerate:

> "Some 7 million adults in England – 1 in 5 adults – if given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, cannot locate the page reference for plumbers. This is an example of functional illiteracy. It means that 1 in 5 adults have less literacy than is expected of an 11-year-old child ... 1 in 3 adults in this country cannot calculate the area of a room that is 21 x 14 feet, even with the aid of a calculator; 1 in 4 adults cannot calculate the change they should get out of £2 when they buy a loaf of bread for 68p and two tins of beans for 45p each."[30]

The Moser Report sees these levels of innumeracy and illiteracy as significant barriers to individuals' ability to get and stay in work or to ever get any kind of decent work at all. Bad work may be a convenient choice for those who may not wish to confront the very reasons why they find themselves in the jobs that they do. However, it cannot be either acceptable or sustainable for individuals or organisations to rely on this mutually reinforcing proposition. Unskilled jobs are disappearing and so, though perhaps more gradually, are the unskilled workers who might typically fill them.

The stability or security of people's jobs are another obvious factor in quality – from anyone's perspective. It has generally been accepted that, over the past twenty years, people have begun to feel increasingly

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insecure in their jobs. This is true despite the fact that the average time spent in jobs has hardly changed over the same period of time.[31] There are two sides to this perceived increase in risk; first, workers are more worried about the long-term sustainability of their jobs, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing and other technical professions; and second, they are more worried about how difficult it might be to get another job if they lose the one they have. This might be because of skills mismatches, geographic job shortages or potential problems regarding salary expectations or age discrimination. It might also be that people are worried about having to work in a sector full of bad jobs. Despite the fact that there have been several high-profile campaigns by retailers such as ASDA,[32] B&Q and Tesco to recruit older workers, it might actually increase workers' unease if they feel in some way 'above' this kind of work.

All work and no play

Working hours are becoming one of the most important determinants of work quality and job satisfaction. Even so, the expressions of this quality, or lack of, vary widely. The chattering classes talk fondly of achieving a better 'work-life balance' or greater 'time sovereignty' in their jobs, while most employees just want to work less hours, travel for less time or to have longer amounts of paid holiday. Either way, we are seeing the inevitable response to Britain's long working hours culture[33] – so much so that even the aforementioned professions of law, medicine and accountancy now regularly throw up examples of 'down shifters' or leavers.

As Richard Reeves has pointed out, the key may not be the amount of time that people work but the sense of control over these hours that actually matters.[34] His suggestion that all workers should be allowed greater control over their working time in return for greater individual levels of productivity, was met with derision from those who cited the complete irrelevance of this notion for check-out staff or other shiftworkers.[35] However, returning to ASDA – an employer of such workers – we find that the idea may have been right all along. Across all their stores and employees, ASDA seem to have a form of leave for just about anything. Grandparental leave and Benidorm leave for older workers,

school starting leave and nativity play leave for parents and study leave and religious festival leave for others – all on top of the expected allowances for parenthood, bereavement and holidays. As Gavin Swan, People Manager at ASDA Wal-Mart in Eastlands, Manchester – says:

> "We will invent leave for pretty much anything – we really just want to encourage colleagues to ask in the first place."[16]

However wide-ranging and subjective judgements about quality can be, it is still important for the government, at least, to try and take a view about work quality. The DTI and Industry's regular Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) also attempts to gauge both job quality and workplace satisfaction. The most recent survey in 1998 asked employees how satisfied they were with the following aspects of their jobs:

- the amount of influence they have over their job
- the amount of pay they receive
- the sense of achievement they get from their work
- the respect they get from their managers.

The most common source of dissatisfaction is predictably, pay, with nearly two-thirds of respondents being unhappy to some degree. However, across all four measures fewer than one in ten were very satisfied overall; almost half were satisfied; three in ten were neither satisfied or dissatisfied and the rest – two in ten – were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their work. On the face of it, not an awful result for the UK workforce. However, if you look at it a slightly different way there is fairly widespread dissatisfaction at the bottom and a thick layer of organisational ambivalence above – two conditions that apparently cover half of the UK's workforce.

You can cut this whichever way you like; good jobs and bad jobs, new work or old work, motivated or lazy workers – but the cumulative effect is not good news for any of us, and the government knows it.

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> "The role of government is to help in the following four areas:
> • *Lifelong learning* – to ensure that everyone has access to training and development opportunities.
> • *Autonomy* – to ensure that everyone has some control over the intrinsic factors of their work.
> • *Social protection and anti-discrimination* – to ensure that there are a minimum set of rights in place to protect individuals.
> • *Work-life balance or time sovereignty* – to ensure that all can feel in appropriate control over their working time."[11]

Ministers should also be taking a more macro-economic view in how they judge the organisations that offer good or bad work. Beyond individual factors determining quality, they do of course need to look at how good work might be defined in a national sense. We would venture four measures of good work in this analysis.

- *Quantity* – how many people does an organisation employ?
- *Quality* – how good are their individual terms and conditions?
- *Location* – where is work concentrated and with what types of people?
- *Productivity* – how good is the organisation in business terms?

So ministers may know that there are a variety of needs and prerequisites for making the UK's jobs better. But do they really understand the extent to which they may have to act?

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4 Why good work matters ...

"I know, up on top you are seeing great sights
But down at the bottom, we, too, should have rights." [38]

Since 1997, the Labour government[39] has embarked on a series of major reforms to the UK workplace. This is the infamous 'red tape' about which some employers and business groups complain bitterly. Most have been in direct response to the government's own perceptions about the prevalence of 'bad work' in the labour market. New employment laws have (or will have) covered, quality factors such as pay, working time, consultation, flexibility and discrimination:

"In 1997 one and a half million people were being paid less than £3.20 an hour. Two and a half million workers had no paid holiday. Today they are guaranteed a decent minimum wage. And they have a legal right to four weeks' paid holiday this year.

In 1997 many working parents worried about losing their job if they were called away to care for a sick son or daughter or an ailing parent. Today they have a right to time off work to deal with a family emergency, starting from day one of employment. These fundamental reforms have introduced fairness in the workplace." [40]

However, the UK has a work problem that runs much deeper than this. Without doubt there are too many people in jobs that are low skill, have no prospects and are often unsustainable – the bad jobs do continue to exist. There should be little doubt that jobs which fall beneath many of the criteria that we have explored in section 3 can be called the worst jobs in the UK. In terms of social justice, it seems right for the government to intervene with those employers that do not take heed of these factors; those that pay low wages; those that abuse workers' time; those that fail to offer development or training; those that refuse to communicate with their workforces or to allow membership of trade unions.

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But there are other good reasons for concern. Many employers and employees are subconsciously drawn into a uniquely British way of working. They make up what observers have referred to as Britain's 'low-skill equilibrium'.[41] This analysis suggests that employers in the UK have often found it appropriate to use low specification product or service strategies that have little practical demand for high-skill employees. At the same time, the low-skill equilibrium also places equal emphasis on other routes to business improvement alongside skill-related interventions.

Across the whole workforce the result of the dissatisfaction and ambivalence described by UK workers in the WERS survey is damaging enough. However, when combined with a situation where employers and employees are content to just 'stick with their lot'[42] the problem begins to assume much greater proportions.

Productivity is now firmly on the political agenda and improving it is a key objective in Labour's second term. Consistently, the UK has under-performed against its major industrialised counterparts in Europe, North America and the Far East. In 1998, productivity[43] was 13% higher in Germany than in the UK, 21% higher in France, and 36% higher in the US. The UK has as many graduates as France and Germany, but only half as many with intermediate level qualifications[44] as Germany and two-thirds of the number in France.

Part of the UK's problem is the vast difference in performance between our different employers and organisations. The Treasury has identified the disparities in firm performance from this perspective:

> "At the firm level, evidence shows that although the country's most productive firms perform well, they are trailed by a long tail of far less productive firms. Even in the same sector, the most productive firms can be around five times more productive than the least. The UK can therefore improve its overall productivity performance by the least productive firms lifting their performance towards the level of the best firms in their sector, and by strengthening the competitive pressures on them to do so."[45]

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If the Treasury wants to improve the performance, job design and skill levels of these low productivity firms, then it will have to directly address the number of 'bad' jobs in the UK. However, it is at this point that the anxiety about the trade off between quality and quantity returns with a vengeance.

Since 1997, this has been most readily visible in the tension surrounding the introduction of various elements of labour market regulation by the DTI. Trade unions, pressure groups and those on the left of the political spectrum have typically campaigned for higher minimum wages, better working conditions and more employee protection. The government has had to confront two sets of opponents to such regulation. First, and most publicly, they have had to deal with the interests of business and the associated accusations of kow-towing to the private sector and groups such as the CBI. Second, however, they have also had to confront their own fears that too much regulation would adversely affect the flexibility and level of employment within the UK labour market. The crossed fingers of ministers in the early years of government – typified by the introduction of a low minimum wage and by the prevarication over parental leave – have relaxed with the ongoing health of the economy. This has allowed a much higher minimum wage and greater confidence in other areas of regulation, but the overall nervousness remains:

> "So on issues of employment and regulation, we have a minimum wage and fair rights at work. But there will be no dilution of our essentially flexible labour market. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the UK has among the least regulated product and labour markets of any major industrialised country. It will stay that way."[46]

And as ministers have also pointed out, in some areas of government, there is no immediate distinction between the quality of jobs on offer:

> "So the future is not just about getting a job but also about developing adaptability within the labour market. Our labour market policy needs to build in more capacity for adaptability and also the awareness that 'work

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> readiness' will be a constant asset. In this sense we don't distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' jobs – we have a work first approach."[47]

It makes no sense. Government should worry much more about how to intervene in our bad job problem – and not just endorse their right to exist. And here's why:

Work ... just a little bit

Evidence suggests that UK employees are becoming more critical of their workplaces, and increasingly less satisfied with what they offer. In particular, on 'quality' issues such as working hours, workload, training and pay, the level of contentment of UK employees has declined visibly. More and more workers are dissatisfied and the level of this discontentment with their prospects, pay levels, working hours have all roughly halved in less than ten years. Perhaps the number of bad jobs – at least in the eyes of the people that have to do them – are actually increasing. This picture is true of both the public and private sectors, with only negligible differences between them. Neither the public nor private sectors have a monopoly on bad jobs.

TABLE 2 The search for satisfaction

The percentage of employees satisfied (either 'completely' or 'very') with key terms and conditions has fallen markedly over the last decade.

	1992	2000
Prospects	23	15
Pay levels	25	13
Job security	44	39
Use of abilities	54	44
Use of initiative	58	49
Hours worked	44	24
The work itself	54	42
Amount of work	40	22
Variety of work	50	37
Training	32	22
Overall	52	45

Source: PSI/LSE 'Working in Britain' Survey

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Perhaps the most damning implication of these workforce experiences and attitudes is the widespread retreat of discretionary effort among the UK workforce. Put simply, we care less and we put less in. Comparing 2000 to 1992, the proportion of men and women who only work as hard as they have to has doubled. This represents a breathtaking collapse of commitment in the UK workforce.

And we wonder why bad jobs are a problem? Good work matters, not just to those people who might be fortunate to do these kinds of jobs. We need more good jobs in Britain because we need to perform better as an entire labour market, as organisations and as individuals. It isn't just an issue of social justice – as former US President Clinton so memorably said: 'it's the economy, stupid!'

The verdict ...

Is new work good work? The slightly predictable answer by now is that some of it is. Not a very startling conclusion, it might be said, but in terms of the general public perception about newer types of job in the labour market perhaps it is. Quality it seems, is ultimately defined by the individual. However, these perceptions are inevitably coloured by the circumstances in which people find themselves; by the time, the place and the wide range of motivations for having to do a particular job in the first place. One person's quality may be another's purgatory and vice versa.

Certainly we should not be so misty-eyed about some of the jobs that dominated our labour markets in the past. Yes, we should be concerned about where jobs have been lost and the effect that redundancy and business closure has on both individuals and communities, but we should not pretend that all the jobs that have disappeared over the past thirty years have been good ones. In fact, we should be much more honest about comparing older, more traditional jobs to newer forms of work.

As we have seen, ASDA has been voted the best place to work in Britain – and with a closer look we can begin to understand some of the reasons for this. We have seen the approach that the organisation has to its employees or colleagues and the vast range of benefits on offer to them. Against all the academic benchmarks of quality seen in section 3, ASDA performs well. When compared to the more popular notions of what constitutes good work it appears to do even better. And so, in general, should the sector that ASDA represents.

Retail has been one of the most maligned types of work in modern Britain – and we should finally acknowledge that our popular perceptions have been misplaced. The public conversation about work has been wrong.

Not only this, but retailers like ASDA have also been at the forefront of business in restoring job opportunities to the parts of Britain that need them the most. Until the last couple of years, East Manchester was one of the most deprived communities in the North West with high levels of

unemployment, crime and urban decay. There are few conversations about ASDA or retail providing bad jobs in this part of Manchester.

The key to their success, says People Director David Smith, is to treat everyone as an individual, as well as part of the ASDA family:

> "You cannot ask colleagues to behave well if they are miserable, and you cannot hide how you are feeling from 11 million customers a week. ASDA is a family, and I am humbled when new starters tell me that our values really are not just a plaque on the wall."

It is time that we gave the retail sector its dues – it serves us better than we think. Perhaps it's time to make a sequel to *The Full Monty*.

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1 We know that children who grow up in poor families are less likely to reach their full potential, less likely to stay on at school, or even attend school, more likely to fall into the dead end of unemployment and poverty as an adult, more likely to become unmarried teenage mothers, more likely to be in the worst jobs or no jobs at all – Gordon Brown 1999.

2 *Jobs from Hell, The Worst Job in Britain*, etc.

3 Tom Bentley of Demos alleges that 'Since 1950 the UK has lost 5 million jobs in the producing industries and gained some 8 million in services. We now earn more revenue from Indian restaurants than from coal, steel and shipbuilding combined.' (*Learning Beyond the Classroom*, 1998).

4 Terry Leahy, CEO of Tesco, in a speech to London Business School.

5 See *Inconvenience Food*, Demos 2002.

6 It has been estimated that one in three US workers have worked in McDonald's.

7 In the original script for *The Full Monty*, the author Simon Beaufoy based these scenes in Woolworths.

8 *The Full Monty*, 20th Century Fox, 1997.

9 ASDA announced 10,000 new jobs nationwide on 18th September 2001.

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16 Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, 1848.

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41 Finegold and Soskice (1988); Keep and Mayhew (1998).
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Contact us by telephone on: 0870 165 6700
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